

If you run into **Mel Croucher** at a party, don't ask him what he does for a living or he'll set his dog on you. **Simon Edwards**, meanwhile, gets to the bottom of an unsavoury chain email

MEL CROUCHER
RANTS

ILLUSTRATION: DAVID SIMONDS

Then Penelope Poodle, on heat and chasing balls, had the audacity to complain about the wireless network I had installed for her several months earlier. Apparently it was my fault that her mother had been gambling away all her pension online. I'm used to being taken for granted when it comes to computer-problem solving for people I hardly know, but it's a bit

How come it is socially acceptable to impose on the time and goodwill of anyone who admits to the faintest knowledge of computers? More to the point, how come there is no genuine appreciation when I have solved their poxy problem? They shrug and dismiss it from their minds. Of course it was solved. They could have done it themselves really, if they'd had the time and inclination. But computers are funny things, aren't they, and it's best to leave buggering about with them to saps like me.



Well, never again. I'm through with sapping, and if you know anything at all about computers and computing, I'd advise you never, ever to let on.

SPREADING THE LIE



SIMON EDWARDS
RANTS

"Facts alone are wanted in life." Readers of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* may remember the dry schoolmaster Thomas Gradgrind, whose approach to education was based relentlessly on facts. With no room for "fancy", his students were taught to strip away their imaginations and replace them with memorised definitions and fundamental truths. They must "be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact". Gradgrind would no doubt despair at both today's liberal education and the amount of non-fact to be found on the internet.

This month a friend of mine, who I generally consider to be of sound mind, forwarded me a chain email. The message discussed

British culture and the supposed threat that immigrants pose to 'our' way of life. The true British way of life. I noticed that this chain letter had been forwarded to some of my other friends, as well as people I didn't know. I wondered what they would make of it.

At face value, some of the arguments in the message made sense and I found myself agreeing with bits of it, although I didn't like the tone. And then I smelled a rat. The more I sniffed, the more stinky some of those facts seemed.

The main thrust of the message was that people can visit our country, make their home here and we will welcome them with open arms. But should they find our Godly way of life and established customs (wearing England football shirts appears to be one of the most important ones) offensive, they can always leave again.

So far, so reasonable. However, this point of view was prefaced with some 'facts' designed to rile the reader and get them worked up into a defensive frenzy. After all, if very few immigrants are seen to be offended by British infidelic ways then the whole discussion about 'them' and 'us' is rather pointless. The email needed to make British customs appear to be under attack, then we could all get good and worked up about it and maybe chuck a brick at the nearest mosque/synagogue/takeaway.

CULTURE SHOCK

The author was driven to write this email message "after hearing that many cities did not want to offend other cultures by putting up Xmas lights, so DIDN'T! After hearing that the Birmingham council changed its opinion and let a Muslim woman have her picture on her driver's licence with her face covered. After hearing of a primary school in Birmingham where a boy was told that for PE he could wear Football League shirts (Aston Villa, Birmingham, West Brom and so on) but NOT an England shirt as it could offend others!"

If these claims are true, it seems that local councils and other institutions are making some rather silly decisions in an effort to pacify the roaring hordes of "other cultures", who have no doubt come over here to cover our women and work on Sundays. At this point the Thomas Gradgrind in me wondered if there was any basis of truth to these stories. I enlisted Google to help research this terrible threat to the Great British way of life.

I didn't find any evidence that the anecdotes were true. I did find some news stories about a US Muslim woman being prevented

from wearing a face-covering niqab when having her photo taken for her driving licence, and a few about other Muslim women being prevented (and then allowed) to wear headscarves, faces in full view, for their photo sessions. Not much threat to our 'ways' so far.

I had no joy finding details of the Birmingham council that allowed women to cover their faces for driving licence photos. In fact, according to the website of *The Muslim News*, the Driving Standards Agency (DSA) requires that women wearing the niqab must temporarily remove it in a private room to prove to a female examiner that they look like their photo on their licence. If the photo on the licence did not show their uncovered face, this system of checks would be pointless.

Neither could I find any evidence to support the story of the little boy who wanted to wear an England shirt during PE but was prevented by a mysteriously unnamed primary school. There is some truth to the secularisation of religious festivals, though. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, "a number of town halls have tried to excise references to Christianity from Christmas, in one case by renaming their municipal celebrations 'Winterval'". The Winterval idea came from Birmingham, which also happens to have been singled out by the email as an overly PC council.

SECULAR MOTION

If our councils and schools are behaving this way, in my ever-so-humble opinion, they are acting incorrectly. I'm not alone and many people share this view, including some Muslims. The email neglected to mention that, in the run-up to Christmas 2006, Muslim and Christian leaders attacked councils and politicians who tried to take the religious theme out of the holiday season. "The desire to secularise religious festivals is offensive to both of our communities," said the joint statement from the Christian Muslim Forum.

Finally, the email quoted what it claimed was an 'editorial' written by a UK citizen, which was published in a British tabloid. It doesn't mention the tabloid's title, for some reason. Neither did the author enlarge on why the editorial was included in the newspaper. Was this poorly written text used as a quote by a journalist writing an article about right-minded people? Or right-wing folk? I found that it wasn't used at all.

Running a Google search for some of the key phrases in the

email brings up lots of links. However, not one of them points to any news sources, tabloid or otherwise. Instead, you will find links to numerous web forums and blogs that feature this email verbatim. The editorial contained this choice phrase: "In God We Trust" is our national motto. This is not some Christian, right-wing, political slogan. We adopted this motto because Christian men and women, on Christian principles, founded this nation, and this is clearly documented." Clearly documented it is, if you are talking about the United States of America.

WEB OF DECEIT

The vast array of information on the internet, combined with powerful search tools such as Google and online encyclopedias such as Wikipedia, makes fact-checking much easier than it was 10 years ago. But while it may be a fun project to dissect a piece of racist propaganda, finding it as empty as the pews of our churches, we should not forget that the internet is also packed with misinformation.

As a final test, I picked a sentence from the email that contained no UK reference and searched for it on Google. The first link confirmed what I had suspected, that the article had started its loathsome little life in America. Since its origin as a piece in *The Barstow Trader*, written by Barry Loudermilk days after the events of 11th September 2001, the text was later altered to create an American chain letter. Over the years further changes and additions were made to create Australian and UK versions.

The moral of the story is this: never forget that the source of the information is as important as the information itself. There are far too many personal websites containing a version of this email that present its contents as fact. There are far too many people with email accounts who will accept the content, feed off it and forward it.

I've sent my little analysis of this racist email to the person who forwarded it to me and to the others who received it at the same time. Maybe they will forward it as a chain letter to balance things out, but I fear that misinformation travels faster and further than facts. Today we have access to the most powerful information system ever invented, but the gullible, ignorant and lazy will pick and choose the bits that support their ill-considered opinions. There are none so blind as those who can't be arsed. Now that's a fact. **CS**